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ABSTRACT

Films such as Peter Weir's 1985 film "Witness" can be used in intercultural communication classrooms to increase intercultural understanding, provide a substitute for experience, and compare cultures. In "Witness," an Amish boy witnesses the murder of an undercover narcotics agent. The investigating detective, the boy, and his widowed mother are forced to flee to the Amish country, and the film becomes an action-packed struggle of life and death interwoven with caring and forbidden love. Since before studying the communication patterns of another culture, students should understand their own cultural patterns, students complete cultural values sheets before viewing the film. In addition, students are asked to write what they know about the Amish and how they know it. While viewing the film, students are asked to note: (1) their perception of Amish culture; (2) their perception of American culture; (3) examples of cultural differences in communication; (4) their perception of the values of cultures depicted in the film; (5) what they learned; and (6) what the characters learned about the other culture. After viewing the film, differing cultural values and concepts of intercultural communication are discussed, using observations from the film, responses to the sheets mentioned, and value classification systems. Some concepts illustrated by this film are the idea of a subculture, the manifestation of cultural values, and cultural models for appropriate interpersonal communication. (Thirty-two references are attached.) (PRA)

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TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE HOLLYWOOD FILM: AN ANALYSIS OF "WITNESS"

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Teaching Intercultural Communication through the Hollywood Film: An Analysis of "Witness"

According to Sharon K. Ruhly, "The communication of culture through film should be an area of interest to the communication scholar" (1974, p. 9). In her article she gives several reasons for using film in the intercultural classroom. Films can increase intercultural understanding because the "image" is a language which can unite people. Films provide an important substitute for experience that students cannot readily have. Also, films can be used to compare cultures. In addition, films can be used as a method to combat functional illiteracy and the aversion to print, increasingly common in student populations.

Ruhly defines a film that communicates culture as "any film dealing with a specific culture or cultures and/or presenting members of a specific culture or cultures, shown to members of a second culture; or a film made by specific members of a specific culture and shown to members of a second culture, who may learn something about the first culture by viewing the film" (p.9). She notes that one focus is the Hollywood feature film.

A recurring theme in the Hollywood film is the "stranger in a foreign culture." The culture may be foreign due to differences in place, social status, or time. Among the many examples that could be cited are "It's a Wonderful Life," "Coming to America," "Star Man," "Splash," "Back to the Future II," "The Gods Must Be Crazy," "Crocodile Dundee II," "El Norte," and "Witness."

"Witness," a 1985 film directed by Peter Weir, stars Harrison Ford as John Book, a hardened Philadelphia detective. While Rachel Lapp, a young Amish widow, played by Kelly McGillis, and her son, Samuel, are waiting to change trains at the Philadelphia train station, Samuel witnesses the murder of an undercover narcotics agent. Caught up in the events, John Book, Rachel, and Samuel are forced to flee back to the Amish community. According to the blurb on the case of the Paramount Home Video (1986) of this film, "Harrison Ford is sensational as Book, the cop who runs head-on into the non-violent world of a Pennsylvania Amish community. The end result is an action-packed struggle of life and death, interwoven with a sensitive undercurrent of caring and forbidden love."

In this paper, the film "Witness" will be used as an illustration of the way a Hollywood feature film can be used in the classroom. Other Hollywood feature films used to teach various principles of communication include "The Poseidon Adventure" (Shields & Kidd, 1973), "Ordinary People" (Dunn, 1986), "Working Girl" (Schwartz & Garcia Perez, 1990), "Twelve Angry Men" (McKinney, 1990), "In Country" and "Places in the Heart" (Larsen, 1989), as well as those mentioned at the end of the Ruhly article (1974, pp. 50-53).

In this presentation, the universality of films and their influence on culture will be discussed briefly. Then we will suggest procedures for preparing students for viewing "Witness," and discuss the intercultural communication concepts illustrated in the film.

In a Unesco report entitled "Film as a Universal Mass Medium" (1976), it is noted that in the seventies, fifty countries were regularly producing feature films, and the rest of the world depended on them for supply, with American films being the most widely distributed foreign films in Asia. A more recent article by Riding (1991) notes that American movies are the biggest box office hits in France. The images of Americans people of other cultures might hold, based on their viewing of Hollywood films, such as "Witness," provide material for a stimulating discussion of stereotypes and cultural values.

It is asserted by some scholars that film and the mass media exert a great influence on viewers. For example, Bataille and Silet (1980) maintain that "Film functions strongly in our culture as a purveyor of national ideologies, values, and trends. This is especially true of our understanding of minorities" (p. xix). According to Gumpert and Cathcart, mass media reflect social values, yet also "shape our value hierarchy and even project values onto society" (1986, p. 472). They say that we may accept values or reject them because they threaten our way of life. They mention the Amish as an example of a group which vigorously opposes any media inputs into their communities. For example, this is clearly seen in "Witness," when the playing of a popular song on the radio by an outsider is a cause for serious concern.

As noted above, one way films may shape our culture is in the presentation of stereotypes. According to Gundlach (1947), "Hollywood employs stereotypes because they are acceptable to the masses, and Hollywood is dependent upon on the masses for its income" (cited by Ruhly, p. 46). Discussions of stereotyping of Blacks, Arabs, Native Americans, Japanese Americans and women by the media are found in works by Real (1989), Bataille and Silet (1980), Butterfield (1990), Settle (1987), Chira (1989), Morais (1990), Lew (1990) Dorris (1991), and Wilson and Gutierrez (1985). Indications of stereotypes are found in "Witness," such as corrupt policemen, insensitive tourists, and perceptions the Amish as some religious group. For instance, John's sister calls Rachel and Samuel "Mormons."

It is often said that before studying communication patterns in another culture, one should understand one's own cultural patterns. Students should have a chance to examine their values, which may or may not be those of the dominant culture. Before viewing "Witness," I ask students to complete the Rokeach Terminal Values sheet (Lustig, 1988) and the Cultural Values sheet (Cardot & Dodd, 1987). After viewing the film, we discuss differing cultural values, using observations from "Witness," student responses to the two sheets previously mentioned, and the Value Classification System from Sitaram and

Cogdell(1976), and Hofstede's Four Dimensions of Values (1980).

In addition, before viewing the film, I do two other things. I ask the students to write down what they know about the Amish and how they had learned it. Then I give students instructions on what to look for and make notes on. For example, I ask them to note, based on the film, (1)their perception of Amish culture, (2)their perception of American culture, (3)examples of cultural differences in communication (4)their perception of the values of cultures depicted in the film, (5)what they learned and (6)what the characters learned about another culture. These are fairly general questions, but they help to keep the students focussed on the film as an educational tool.

Then, based on the common experience of viewing "Witness," I can discuss concepts of intercultural communication presented in the text. Some concepts can be introduced right after viewing the film, using illustrations from the film. As other concepts are discussed later on in the semester, I can refer back to the film for meaningful and readily accessible illustrations.

What are some of the concepts illustrated by "Witness"? Let us begin with the idea of a subculture. Dodd (1987) defines a subculture as a culture within another culture. One requirement for a subculture is that the members are consciously aware of their membership in that subculture. For example, the police chief is aware of his and Book's membership in the law enforcement subculture when he explains to the Amish that Book had broken the rules of his club, saying, "We're like the Amish . . . we're a cult, too, . . . a club." It is clear that the Amish regard themselves apart from the American culture. Rachel is told to "be careful among the English," while Samuel is reminded by his grandfather of the Amish belief to "Be ye separate."

Furthermore, Dodd discusses types of subcultures, one of which is the counter culture, which has its common code, common symbols, and withdraws from the parent culture. Certainly, the Amish community depicted in the film qualifies as a counter culture, using Dodd's criteria. Dodd also discusses the fact that other subcultures have different communication styles. Among the subcultures he mentions, which are illustrated in "Witness," are rural-urban, male-female, and organizational (the police department).

Another element of culture noted in "Witness" is the manifestation of cultural values. According to Larsen, the important differences between cultures ---values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior---are "trained" into us from early childhood, through our language, myths and tales, and our observations of those around us (1989. p.220). As Samuel, the little boy, observes his elders and talks to them, he learns Amish beliefs.

In his discussion of cultural myths and values, Larsen notes Reich's cultural myths. Some illustrations are found in

"Witness." The triumphant individual is exemplified by John Book, the policeman thrust into the Amish culture due to circumstances beyond his control. The myth of the benevolent community is illustrated by the Amish community and its treatment of the injured Book. The myth of rot at the top is seen in the corruption of the police chief. The myth of a man's man is seen in the behavior of John Book.

American values, as summarized by Larsen, include several seen in the film. The idea of puritan morality, the willingness to cast the world into categories of good vs. evil, is seen in the behavior of Book and also the Amish. The value of the individual, as noted above, is seen in the actions of John Book. This contrasts with the importance of the group as valued by the Amish. For example, the father of Rachel must confer with the elders before deciding what to do about Book. In another instance, the Amish community works together to build a barn for one of its members. The American value of achievement and success, exemplified by the accumulation of power, wealth, and status, is certainly not evident in the Amish values. Indeed, the Amish shun the world of the "English." Their maintaining the old ways is another way in which Amish values differ from American values, such as the belief in change and progress.

The differences between the American and Amish cultures are further suggested in the film by the contrast between the violence of life in Philadelphia, with its corruption, drug dealers, and seedy bars and the opening scenes of the farm, with the shots of long grass and the peaceful scenes in church and home. The hectic life of the city, exemplified by a quick meal in a fast food place and rapid travel in cars and taxis contrasts with the slower pace of the country, where meals are lingered over and truly enjoyed and transportation is more leisurely in a horse drawn carriage.

At the end of the film, the peaceful rural countryside, complete with chirping birds, contrasts with the incipient violence, present in the bullets and guns in the trunk of the car. Indeed, the exclusion of physical and psychological violence in the Amish community is noted by Larsen as an example of one of Ellul's strategies to escape the pervasiveness of the seemingly benign propaganda of twentieth century technocracies.

Aside from differences in values, the film presents other aspects of cultural differences. For example, John communicates in a more dynamic way, acceptable in his culture, while Rachel, her father, and Daniel, Rachel's suitor, typify the more quiet ways of theirs. As Bennett and McKnight (1966) note, we have cultural models for appropriate interpersonal interaction.

Models for appropriate interpersonal interaction might be further explored in the observation of differences in nonverbal communication. For example, who can touch whom, when, and where. When Daniel comes to court Rachel, a polite distance is maintained between them as they sit on a wide swing. Further,

there is clearly a growing attraction between John and Rachel. When they are alone, trying to see if John can get his car started, the radio is turned on. Their interest in each other is expressed in a universal nonverbal code. In a later scene, before kissing John, Rachel removes her hat, perhaps indicating that she is temporarily leaving her culture.

Other aspects of differences in nonverbal communication are clothing and furniture. The color and style of clothing used by the Amish is quite different from normal American usage. Indeed, one of the characters refers to their "funny black threads." Buttons are avoided as not being plain enough. The furniture in the homes of John's sister and of the police chief form quite a contrast with that in the home of Rachel and her father.

Earlier we mentioned the Hollywood theme of the foreigner in a strange land. Rachel and Samuel are briefly foreigners in the strange world of Philadelphia. John is later a stranger in the world of the Amish. Argyle (1988) notes that a number of category schemes have been produced to describe the main modes of response of visitors to different cultures. The principle alternatives are (1)detached observers who avoid involvement; (2) reluctant and cautious participants in the local culture; (3) enthusiastic participants, some of whom come to reject their original culture, and (4)settlers. The Amish in the film, and the tourists going to "view" the Amish clearly fit the first category. At the beginning of the film, Rachel is determined not to get involved with the "English," and although she resists, she is drawn in, due to circumstances beyond her control. For example, she tells Book that they do not need to know anything about him. John might fit in the second alternative. He is drawn into the group by necessity, and seems to adapt and appreciate some of the values of the culture. This is seen in his relationships with Samuel and Rachel. For example, he tells Rachel, "If we made love last night, I'd have to stay or you'd have to leave." John also pitches in with the family and community chores.

In fact, John seems to do some of the things suggested by Samovar and Porter (1991) and Dodd (1987) as ways to improve intercultural communication. For instance, he asks for feedback when he puts on Amish clothing. In answer to his "Do I look Amish?" Rachel tells him that he looks "plain." He is observant and tries to learn what behavior is appropriate. The scenes where his gun is discussed are illustrations of this. Another suggestion made by Dodd to aid intercultural communication is to try new skills. John Book learns how to milk a cow, having been accoutered in the proper milking hat.

At the end of the film, Book is accepted by the community. Let us remember that at the beginning of the film, Rachel was told to be careful among "the English." Later, the wounded John is referred to as "the English." For example, someone asks, "Is the English dead?" John learns to "respect their ways" by unloading his gun and leaving it and the bullets with Rachel to hide in the kitchen, where his gun will be

"safe." Later, Samuel tells his grandfather that the gun is used for killing only bad men. The grandfather tells Samuel that having seen "them," he is becoming one of them. He reminds Samuel that it is wrong for a man to take the life of another man.

However, using the "textbook" skills to be a good intercultural communicator, John makes friends with members of his host culture and earns their respect. As John leaves to return to "his world" at the end of the film, he is warned by the grandfather to "be careful out among the English," indicating the grandfather's concern for and acceptance of John.

After viewing the film, students may want to learn how accurately the film portrayed the Amish culture, since they will recognize that only some segments of American culture were represented. There is a documentary, produced in 1985, called "The Amish: Not to be Modern," which provides interviews with former members and a view of the Amish culture from another perspective. News articles and books on the Amish also can provide additional information. For example, a feature article on Amish cooking (Clark, 1990), reveals scenes of Amish domestic life much like those in "Witness." Another news article (Hinds, 1990) describes a clash between an Amish horse farmer and twentieth century zoning laws over sewerage regulations. These laws were designed for a water-guzzling suburban family on a half-acre lot and not for a water-hauling Amish family on a fifteen-acre farm. Even encyclopedia articles on the Amish or Mennonites, such as the one found in The New Columbia Encyclopedia, mention rejection of worldly concerns, refusal to bear arms, simplicity of dress, and disapproval of marriage with one outside their faith.

Although viewing a full-length feature film takes a lot of class time, if students are given direction as to how they should view the film, and adequate time is taken for processing, this activity provides a valuable point of departure for understanding important concepts presented in the intercultural communication course.

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